

COMMENTARY

The Academy Is Well Positioned to Offer Pharmacy Technician Training Programs

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Submitted January 21, 2021; accepted May 5, 2021; published February 2022.

Schools and colleges of pharmacy are optimally positioned to train the entire pharmacy team, including pharmacists and pharmacy support personnel, because they can provide comprehensive workforce development, utilize established faculty expertise, harness existing infrastructure, afford opportunities for intraprofessional education, and support institutional growth and reputability. As the emphasis of training shifts towards team-based approaches and expanded responsibilities, ensuring the existing and future pharmacy workforce is equipped to serve their communities becomes increasingly important. Thus, schools and colleges of pharmacy should consider offering a pharmacy technician training program to meet the needs of their community and the profession.

Keywords: pharmacy technician, college of pharmacy, workforce development

INTRODUCTION

Just as the role of the pharmacist has continued to evolve, with a focus in recent years on pharmacists offering more clinical services, so too the role of the pharmacy technician is evolving. The technician's role has advanced over the past decade as employers seek to more efficiently support pharmacist-delivered patient care services. One example is an initiative that supports technicians completing order verification through a "tech-check-tech" model in community and hospital settings.¹⁻³ The COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized this need for an expanded scope of technician practice. In October 2020, the Department of Health and Human Services authorized qualified pharmacy technicians to administer COVID-19 vaccines.⁴ With community pharmacies serving one of the most essential access points to health care, this authorization facilitated technicians playing an integral role in combating COVID-19 in communities across the nation. This is a clear example where expanding the scope of the pharmacy technician's role could meet a current practice need and improve the efficient delivery of patient care.

DISCUSSION

Like most entry-level professions, however, there are major challenges faced by the technician workforce, such

as a patchwork of practice entry requirements across states; reports of low job satisfaction, particularly in high stress environments; and high levels of turnover.⁵⁻⁷ In recent years, numerous efforts have been made at the national and state level to develop the technician workforce. For example, many states now require technicians to be certified, or if not, allow those technicians who are certified to take on more responsibility within the pharmacy.^{5,8} Additionally, the Pharmacy Technician Certification Board offers specialty assessment-based certifications and has announced an advanced pharmacy technician credential to support the expanding role of technicians.⁹

Researchers have found that pharmacy technicians that are certified report having a stronger commitment to the pharmacy profession, and employers generally agree that certified technicians offer more value to the organization.^{10,11} Of the 417,780 employed pharmacy technicians in the United States in 2019, 288,866 were certified.¹² These numbers are predicted to increase over the next decade as the job market for pharmacy technicians continues to grow.¹³ Considering the gap in the number of pharmacy technicians that are certified, coupled with anticipated career growth, there is an opportunity for schools and colleges of pharmacy to train the next generation of pharmacy technicians for their expanded role on the pharmacy team.

Surprisingly, though, few colleges of pharmacy are involved in formalized technician training programs.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ Perhaps the largest barrier for institutions to adopt pharmacy technician training programs has been concerns related to cost and return on investment. However, as evidenced by the current COVID-19 pandemic, innovative

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education models, such as online or hybrid delivery methodologies, can meet student expectations and allow schools to recruit from a national pool of learners. In addition, national stakeholders have engaged in robust debate about these wide variations in pharmacy technician training, which led to consensus recommendations to advance the standardization for technician training.¹⁷ With growing expectations from the public, regulators, and employers for pharmacy schools to take on this challenge, opportunities exist for institutions to invest in training programs for pharmacy technicians, which will ultimately elevate the entire pharmacy team.

Currently, technician training programs are offered by a diverse group of organizations: community colleges, pharmacy chains, health systems, the United States military, and select colleges and universities.¹⁸ On average, these programs have a class size of 26 students (range, 3 to 110 students), last 32 weeks (range, 18 hours to 24 months), and have a median tuition of \$4,800, with select programs leading to an associate's degree.¹⁴

In October 2020, The College of Pharmacy at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center launched a pharmacy technician training program, and has enrolled 29 learners in three cohorts to date. This program is completely online; is offered as a cohort model where all the learners progress through the 12-week program together, with four planned offerings per year; is self-paced; provides dedicated faculty support; supports a flexible and affordable pricing model; and takes approximately 12 weeks to complete. Now that our institution has gained this year of experience in pharmacy technician education, we challenge more members of the Academy to invest in pharmacy technician training. Schools and colleges of pharmacy are optimally positioned to train the entire pharmacy team, including pharmacy technicians, for five reasons: they are able to provide comprehensive workforce development, utilize established faculty expertise, harness existing infrastructure, develop opportunities for intraprofessional education, and support institutional growth and reputability.

First, a benefit of a pharmacy school having a technician training program is that it will allow them to provide comprehensive workforce development in that they can train every member of the pharmacy team. These training programs can equip technicians to meet the expectations that come with their expanded roles within the health care system that allow pharmacists to provide additional services that advance patient care.² This aligns with our college's mission to "educate, inspire, discover, and serve to advance health."¹⁹ Comprehensive development will require training the entire team, and having a technician training program at a college of pharmacy will allow the

institution to do just that. As program directors, our goal is to implement a pharmacy technician training program that optimally positions learners to attain appropriate certification. Even though certification is not the goal of every learner that participates, it is the goal for many, and pharmacists even report that certification should be required for technicians to take on advanced roles.¹⁰ Also, since professional development should continue throughout the technician's career, we housed the program in our Office of Continuing Professional Development so we can continue to support learners in developing, maintaining, and expanding their skills through a lifelong learning approach.

As previously noted, there are various training programs available across the United States for pharmacy technicians that vary widely in hours, cost, duration, and more.¹⁴ Also, technicians commonly receive on-the-job training and may or may not be required to pass a licensing examination in their state to practice. The lack of standardization is quite opposite of that for the Doctor of Pharmacy degree, which requires students to complete several years of rigorous professional education and pass licensing examinations prior to starting practice. Thus, one challenge has been demonstrating the value of our program, even though it is not a degree-granting program, through our marketing and promotional materials. Our program directors often meet with learners prior to starting the program to help ensure the program aligns with their goals. Ultimately, to elevate the pharmacy profession and support the expanded roles of every team member, additional investment in the entire workforce will be necessary. This can be achieved through an educational shift that standardizes minimum training requirements, which is arguably more critical now than ever before, to meet the current need in the workforce for technicians to take on an expanded role.

Second, establishing a pharmacy technician training program in a school of pharmacy allows the program to benefit from the existing faculty expertise, whether to develop the program, identify content that already exists to license for use in the program, or support learner success. Having dedicated faculty that understand the demands placed on every member of the pharmacy team is key to positioning the learner to be successful in their new role. Also, pharmacy faculty can ensure learners progress through the didactic material appropriately develop necessary study habits, and ultimately find employment (eg, helping with effective job searches, resume review, interview preparation, and identifying potential employers. These efforts by faculty will place learners in the best possible position to obtain the job they desire after completing the program.

Concerns about faculty workload may deter some pharmacy schools from launching such a program. However, garnering support from full time faculty (affiliate or volunteer), staff, and current pharmacy students can maximize efficiencies with effort and time commitments required by the program. For example, we partnered with an educational company to develop baseline content for the program, freeing faculty to focus on other aspects of the program such as recruitment, examination preparation, and learner progression. Another approach would be to involve students, residents, or fellows in supporting faculty by serving as instructors or teaching assistants for courses within the pharmacy technician program in which they possess expertise.

Third, schools of pharmacy possess the infrastructure to adequately prepare pharmacy students to train pharmacy technicians. Pharmacy schools and/or continuing pharmacy education providers are keenly capable of identifying the needs of the pharmacy profession and developing a plan to address them. That is because they are required to engage in continuous quality improvement through gap analyses, assessments, and evaluations of their programs to maintain accreditation from Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE). For example, research has shown that pharmacists report that pharmacy technicians need more training in “soft skills,” such as communication.²⁰

A technician training program may opt to offer a specific course in communication or even a course with an experiential component by utilizing existing preceptor relationships that support experiential components of the curriculum for pharmacy students at the college.

Fourth, a pharmacy technician training program affords opportunities to advance intraprofessional education among the entire pharmacy team. While student pharmacists are expected to mentor and train pharmacy technicians upon graduation in a variety of practice settings, there is little mention of intraprofessional training in the ACPE Standards 2016.²¹ Even though these standards only provide guidance to develop a Doctor of Pharmacy curriculum, intraprofessional education is arguably a key skill student pharmacists must develop to manage their future team. Students do interact with technicians to varying degrees during their education, such as on introductory and advanced practice experiences and internships, but how student and technician perceptions and performance on the team is evaluated remains undocumented in the literature. However, research has demonstrated that poor pharmacy management skills are linked to pharmacy technician turnover.²² Given the focus on team-based learning and critical importance of developing management skills, offering a technician training program

is a ripe opportunity for intraprofessional learning activities.

Fifth, a training program supports institutional growth and reputability. As pharmacy schools across the United States face a decrease in pharmacy student applicants, a technician training program not only meets an existing need in the workforce, but also adds a new source of revenue for the college.²² Offering this program can be part of the solution in times of constructing budgets. Also, even though a technician training program does not place pharmacists in jobs or help them pass licensing examinations, the program could serve as a pipeline for the professional PharmD program, as several learners have expressed interest in pursuing a Doctor of Pharmacy degree in the future. There is also the added benefit of elevating an institution’s reputation by bolstering community rapport with employers, recent graduates, and local and state government programs. This allows future employers to focus on organization-specific onboarding efforts. The availability of well-trained pharmacy technicians also allows pharmacists to expand their practice and provide additional patient care services.

Opportunities abound to create synergy between a college of pharmacy and a technician training program. The launch of our program has not been without challenges, such as software platform issues and learner attrition. However, through communication and relationship building with both our partners and future learners, these challenges can be overcome. Future directions may include offering an experiential component to the pharmacy technician program by engaging existing preceptors, or incorporating vaccination training as a standard component of the pharmacy technician program. It will also be important to integrate pharmacy student and pharmacy technician training as much as possible. As the technician’s role is expanding at an unprecedented rate, their training must keep pace to position them and the entire pharmacy team for success.

CONCLUSION

We hope that presenting these five reasons for pharmacy schools to establish a pharmacy technician training program will spur discussion within the Academy. As the focus shifts towards team-based approaches and expanded responsibilities for all team members, ensuring that the existing and future pharmacy workforce is equipped to serve their communities becomes increasingly important. Thus, colleges of pharmacy should consider offering a pharmacy technician training program to meet the needs of their community and the profession.

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